

FORTY YEARS' WORK IN THE NAVY.

AN INTERVIEW WITH MISS AGNES WESTON, OF THE ROYAL SAILORS' REST, PORTSMOUTH.

It is easily seen that all who devote themselves to maintaining and increasing the morale, and consequent efficiency, of the Navy, are engaged in Imperial service of the very highest order. Foremost among such Imperial workers stands the name of Agnes Weston. I knew, vaguely, as do most of us, about the great and beneficent work of "The Mother of the Navy," but was at a loss to understand the loving reverence this evidently remarkable personality inspired in the hearts of men of all grades and ranks in His Majesty's Navy. My enlightenment came about in this wise: Having to spend a day or two in Portsmouth, I was driven to put up in the only available hotel, almost opposite the Royal Sailors' Rest, in the densely crowded Commercial Road, thronged day and night with lively, eager pedestrians, from whom one caught various scraps of conversation: "Meat us at Aggie Weston's," or "Go to the Sailors' Rest—rattling good concerts—fine reading rooms—all that a fellow can want for next to nothing!" Again: "Had there been a few Miss Westons at the head of affairs, we should never have had this terrible war," and so on.

On one occasion, a young man wearing His Majesty's uniform had treated himself not wisely, but too well. Anywhere else his destination would probably have been a police cell, but here in Portsmouth the kindly knight of the truncheon merely said: "Come along my boy! we'll put you in Miss Weston's charge. She'll take care of you until you are fit to look after yourself."

Later I ascertained that such cases were of frequent occurrence, and that the doors of the Royal Sailors' Rest remained open day and night to minister to the needs, temporal and spiritual, of all King's men in either of the services. I discovered, in fact, that life in the Commercial Road mainly centred round "Aggie Weston" and her Sailors' Rest, and that Portsmouth was fully awake to its claims for distinction in this re-

spect, as evidenced by the following incident:—The manager of a menagerie, visiting Portsmouth, sent for the Mayor to name two baby lions, just arrived. The crowds present at the ceremony decided that one was to be called Charles Dickens, in honour of the great novelist, who was born in a small house in the Commercial Road, and the other was to bear the name of Agnes Weston, "because she had done so much to help the lions of the sea." Truly a case of vox populi, vox Dei, showing that the intuition of the crowd is often saner, surer, and swifter even than that of some statesmen.

When eventually I met the Friend of the Bluejackets face to face, I understood Jack's devotion, and many things besides. She looked at me searchingly. The soft, yet keen grey eyes, seemed to gaze into one's inmost soul. Then a sunny smile broke over the mobile features—one of the most wonderful smiles in the world, expressive of tenderness, strength, humour; patience of the divine order, with weakness and defect. Yet the poise of the noble head and the cast of face indicated unflinching resolve, concentrated purpose, indomitable will; in a word, all the qualities necessary for the initiating and carrying out of a stupendous work, in the teeth of all but insurmountable obstacles, of difficulties, utterly overwhelming for a nature formed on less heroic lines.

And then, with a reminiscent look, Miss Weston went on: "Yes, it required courage to take up such work as mine forty years ago. Queen Victoria did not approve of women coming forward in public life, especially unbacked by a man, and did not like me on that account. But **her** son, the Duke of Edinburgh, and **her** daughter, the Empress Frederick, took their mother in hand, and other members of the Royal Family also praised my work. At length I was invited to Windsor. When I told Her Majesty how the Duke of Edinburgh remarked of my friend and helper, Miss Wintz, and myself, that it was astonishing that two women should sail so long in the same boat without capsizing it, she laughed heartily, and said, 'That is so like Alf!' Her last words to me were, 'God bless you and Miss Wintz, and ever prosper you in your good and great work.'"

Her Majesty's womanly intuition enabled her to appreciate the great gifts and devotion of Miss Wintz in forwarding Miss Weston's work; the latter often says: "We, Miss Wintz and myself, are like a pair of scissors—one blade would be of little use without the other." There were some exquisite flowers on the table, brought by the mother of a lad, then a prisoner in Germany. Miss Weston did the only thing in her power—put him on her prisoners' list.

A few figures will give some slight idea of the extent and scope of Miss Weston's work. Over 18,000 families are kept in sight and mind. Nearly 10,000 sailors belong to the Royal Naval Christian Union. The membership of the Royal Naval Temperance Society is now 47,457 (this includes some members of the Royal Naval Christian Union, for there are still Christian men who have not yet realised the duty of abstinence from alcohol for the sake of the weaker brethren).

"Ashore and Afloat," for which Miss Weston has written the monthly letter for forty years, is edited by Miss Wintz, and 80,000 copies were in circulation before the war. Miss Wintz has been Miss Weston's close friend and coadjutor for forty years, and Miss Weston always says that the credit of half the work belongs to her. A Japanese paper, known as "The Light of the World," reaches a distribution of 10,000, and there are Sailors' Rests in every port in Japan.

Lieutenant J. Porch, who "signed on" in 1870, then kindly took us over the building. Sailors had a rough time of it when he "signed on," bully beef and biscuits were the main fare. The niceties of modern diet were not even thought of, and drunkenness was frightfully common. Only those who knew the Navy in the past could appreciate the miracles wrought by Miss Weston and other workers. At the Royal Sailors' Rests each day's work is finished the same night, just as on board of a man-of-war. The necessity for this can be realised by one instance alone. After the battle of Jutland, 6000 letters had to be sent off to 6000 families, expressing sympathy and offering advice and assistance. The whole establishment is almost self-contained; it manufactures its own electric light, mineral waters, etc., and thus gets things at prime cost. The baths and other